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Dr Sharynne McLeod is a senior lecturer in language acquisition in the School of Teacher Education at Charles Sturt University. She initially compiled this bibliography for teachers studying Master of Education (Special Education).

Correspondence to:

Dr Sharynne McLeod

School of Teacher Education

Charles Sturt University

Panorama Ave, Bathurst, NSW 2795

phone: (02) 6338 4463

WEBWORDS 17

Practicable, functional, measurable: Does the web deliver?

Caroline Bowen

Workshops and master classes

Whether it is a workshop, seminar, teleconference or master class, anyone preparing a professional development (PD) activity, thinks deeply about best practice and tries to assemble useful, evidence based information and resources for people to take back to their workplaces. Those who mount such events are mindful of the positive reception attendees give to low-cost, easily implemented, practicable, relevant, procedures, techniques and activities that lead to functional outcomes and measurable gains for clients. From the PD activity audiences' point of view, presenters and organisers alike are obliged to deliver.

Evaluation forms bristle with ticks when a presenter has hit exactly the right level, and happy participants have been provided the means to obtain ready-made, inexpensive (or even free) materials that require minimal adaptation. Satisfaction is often expressed not only in terms of the attendees having extended their knowledge and skills, enjoying contact with colleagues, appreciating the ambience of the venue and the nice nibbles, but also in relation to what they are "given" in a literal sense. Adverse evaluations of individual PD events seem often to reflect a seemingly unquenchable thirst, not just for knowledge, but for more, more and more practical resources.

Guru sites

Much the same can be said of the way Internet guru sites devoted to professional issues are often valued. Visitors approach such sites in the expectation that they will be given something, and that they will not necessarily have to wade through a lot of theoretical data, or do much reading in order to get to it.

An individual or a small group of individuals usually creates a guru site. They are expert in, or passionate about, a certain subject. Guru sites typically offer many links and pointers to carefully selected Internet (and sometimes non-Internet) resources. Ideally, these are selected, organized and annotated in such a way that they streamline on-line research saving the researcher hours of time.

They range in style and content from meta-directories, to one-page lists of annotated links, to mega sites comprising many documents relating to a group of topics (e.g., communication sciences and disorders) or a specific topic (e.g., stuttering), to smaller topic specific sites, and to listservs with associated web resources.

Meta-directories

The highly selective, minimally annotated Hardin Meta Directory is a meticulously maintained directory of directories: a list of links to sites (preferably simple and fast-loading) that have lists of links to other sites. Like other resource lists there, the Speech Pathology¹ page indicates which of the sites included are current holders of the Hardin MD clean bill of health, boasting connection rates of at least 93%. Quick and easy to navigate the Hardin MD pages include sections devoted to Alzheimer's Disease, brain pictures, hearing disorders, larynx pictures/throat disorders, nervous system, neurology, otolaryngology and telemedicine.

Annotated links

At the top of the list of well-maintained speech and hearing guru sites comprising sensibly organised, intelligently annotated lists of links are Sandy and Liz Herring's SLP² and Neurology Related³ websites, and the American Library Association Communication Sciences and Disorders list⁴.

In similar vein in the UK we find the eclectic links⁵ section on the RCSLT site, the *Speech and Language Therapy in Practice* links⁶ page, and the UCL resource list⁷.

Mega sites

In speech-language pathology on the net, the guru's guru is Judith Maginnis Kuster. Judith is an ASHA certified SLP, an associate professor in the Department of Communication Disorders and Speech Clinic Director at Minnesota State University, Mankato. Endlessly creative, this amazing woman is responsible for Net Connections⁸, the ASHA Leader Internet columns, large and useful databases such as her materials⁹ that can be adapted for therapy, and, famously, the Stuttering Home Page¹⁰, mission control, since 1998, of the annual ISAD online conference on stuttering.

Topic specific sites

There are many small to medium sized topic specific sites that offer practical resources. For example, in the area of AAC the University of Nebraska at Lincoln offers AAC Intervention Resources¹¹ and the YAACK¹² pages. Child language sites include Planning Language Therapy¹³, Talking Point¹⁴, eLr Software¹⁵, the Story-Making Machine¹⁶ and Vocal Development¹⁷. For stuttering we find the generous handouts pages from the Australian Stuttering Research Centre¹⁸ and the Bankstown Stuttering Unit¹⁹ and Tony Wray's contribution: stuttering prevention²⁰. One of the pick sites for English language learning is ESL Flow²¹, while for voice we have Voice Therapy Techniques²², Voice Academy²³ (focusing on the care of teachers' voices) and Frequently Prescribed Medications and their Effect on Voice and Speech²⁴. Quite a haul.

Listservs

Listservs are small software program that automatically redistributes email to subscribers to a mailing list or discussion group. Some of the most productive listservs are those with associated websites where messages are archived and "searchable", and documents of interest to the group can be stored and accessed. There are 50 to 60 active Speech Pathology²⁵ listservs in Yahoo! Groups alone, as well as specialist discussion lists such as Apraxia-Kids²⁶, easyspeak²⁷ (for anyone with an interest in children's language and communication difficulties, and how they are supported), and the Neurology Webforum²⁸.

Does the web deliver?

An ever-present theme in guru site feedback is requests for more. More links, tips, answers, resources and ideas; more information, more ... everything! And most visitors want it in a form that is ready to use, NOW! Which begs the question, "Does the Web deliver?" Do speech pathologists find resources they can put to immediate use when they turn to the Internet?

The answer has to be, "not always". Despite the wealth of information on the Internet, on websites and in discussion groups, there are still huge gaps in the free-for-all resource base. Much of the good stuff that is now available is password protected, and only available by paid subscription: just like a PD workshop, seminar, teleconference or master class. Increasingly on the Internet there is no such thing as a completely free lunch. So to really take advantage of what the web has in store, on the members-only areas of the ASHA²⁹ or PATSy³⁰ sites for example, we have to pay for the privilege. You know it makes sense³¹.

Links

1. <http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/hardin/md/speech.html>
2. <http://www.herring.org/speech.html>
3. <http://www.herring.org/neuro.html>
4. http://www.ala.org/Content/NavigationMenu/ACRL/Publications/College_and_Research_Libraries_News/Back_Issues_2001/February2/Communication_Sciences_and_Disorders.htm
5. <http://www.rcslt.org/links.shtml>
6. <http://www.speechmag.com/links.html>
7. <http://library.hcs.ucl.ac.uk/Links/SLT.htm>
8. <http://www.mankato.msus.edu/dept/comdis/kuster2/welcome.html>
9. <http://www.mankato.msus.edu/dept/comdis/kuster2/sptherapy.html>
10. <http://www.mankato.msus.edu/dept/comdis/kuster/stutter.html>
11. <http://aac.unl.edu/intervention.html>
12. <http://aac.unl.edu/yaack/toc.html>
13. <http://newton.uor.edu/facultyfolder/rider/>
14. <http://www.talkingpoint.org.uk/home.asp>
15. <http://www.elr.com.au/>
16. <http://www.communicationconnects.com/stories.asp>
17. <http://www.vocaldevelopment.com/>
18. <http://www3.fhs.usyd.edu.au/asrcwww//index.html>
19. <http://www.swsahs.nsw.gov.au/stuttering/resources.asp>
20. <http://www.prevent-stuttering.com/>
21. <http://www.eslflow.com/Index.html>
22. <http://www.unc.edu/~chooper/classes/voice/webtherapy/index.html>
23. <http://www.voiceacademy.org/vaweb/>
24. <http://www.ncvs.org/ncvs/info/vocol/rx.html>
25. http://health.dir.groups.yahoo.com/dir/Health_Wellness/Professional/Speech_Pathology
26. <http://www.apraxia-kids.org/talk/subscribe.html>
27. <http://lists.becta.org.uk/mailman/listinfo/easyspeak>
28. <http://neuro-mancer.mgh.harvard.edu/cgi-bin/Ultimate.cgi>
29. <http://www.asha.org/default.htm>
30. <http://www.patsy.ac.uk/>
31. <http://www.abc.net.au/thefat/slamminsam/default.htm>

Find Webwords 17, and explore these links and more at http://members.tripod.com/Caroline_Bowen/webwords17.htm

Definitions of some favourite words

workshop noun: a meeting of people to discuss and/or perform practical work in a subject or activity.

master class noun: a class taught by someone who has an expert knowledge or skill in a particular area.

guru noun: a person who is respected for their knowledge of a particular subject and who gives advice.

practicable adjective: 1. capable of being accomplished, done, or put into practice; feasible; 2. capable of being used; usable.

functional adjective: 1. designed to be practical and useful rather than attractive; 2. (of a machine, system, etc.) working in the usual way.

measurable adjective: able to be measured, or large enough to be noticed.

All definitions are drawn from the Cambridge Dictionaries Online <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/>